

Translators *are* Writers: On Literary Translation and Creative Writing

A recurrent question in Kate Briggs's *This Little Art* is whether we, as translators, *write* translations: or do we *make* them, or indeed, do we *do* them? These questions stem from setting the practice of translation in relation to work or craftsmanship – or, indeed, to tables (Briggs discusses this in a section called “Maker of Wholes (Let’s Say of a Table)”. But bringing in the question of “craft”, and its counterpart “art”, when referring to what literary translators actually do, means necessarily that we need to engage in debates similar to those developed decades ago in relation to creative writing. Can we actually teach someone to *write*? If so, how? I have written about the disciplinary boundaries between Creative Writing and Literary Translation for *The Routledge Handbook of Literary Translation*.¹ In this chapter I argue that creative writing as a discipline made a significant contribution to translation studies and the development of the creative turn in the discipline, and it has also paved the way for the introduction of literary translation into academia. The institutional housing of literary translation is, therefore, very significant. When based in a school of English and Creative Writing, as is the case of the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia, it means that the *writing* of literary translations is widely recognised as a *creative writing practice*.

The key question here is: how can we train literary translators better, i.e. so they become better writers? By 2014 the British Centre for Literary Translation had run fourteen extremely successful Literary Translation Summer Schools (the vision of the former director of BCLT, Peter Bush) and had cemented its international reputation as a leading centre for the training of literary translators. The defining feature of the BCLT summer school workshops had always been, and continues to be, the presence of the writer in the room – not because literary translators are not able to make their own individual readings of the source texts, but because writers can add to the translation process their invaluable experience of having undergone a creative process themselves.

I recall that at an earlier stage of planning for the fifteenth session of the summer school the coordinator of the centre at the time, Catherine Fuller, suggested that perhaps we

¹ “Literary Translation and Disciplinary Boundaries: Creative Writing and Interdisciplinarity”. In *The Routledge Handbook of Literary Translation*, edited by Kelly Washbourne (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 42-57.

take a break, do something different. This conversation soon led to the initial planning stages of the BCLT Literary Translation Summer School Summit with Kate Griffin and Daniel Hahn at the helm. Creative Writing workshops were introduced that year for the first time, led by novelist Sarah Bower, and all translators participating in the summit enthusiastically recommended that creative writing workshops should be added to the programme of the literary translation summer school. In July 2015 we launched the first International Literary Translation and Creative Writing Summer School, and through the years, participant feedback has been overwhelmingly positive:

Creative writing workshops opened up my idea of what a text can be.

They have freed me up from more formal training.

Creative writing: this is something that is so beneficial to the literary translator and yet can be slightly daunting as you put a lot of yourself out there. These sessions, though, really helped me to get past the "fear" of my own creative writing and I'm now going to do more.

The creative writing sessions were very enlightening. They helped me to not only explore my own creative writing skills, but also get an insight into how writers have been 'trained' and how they might approach their work.

The creative writing workshops also helped me to better understand my own personal style of writing ... This in turn make me more aware of how my own writing style might influence the way in which I write when translating a literary text.

The creative writing workshops were useful in that I was able to continue to think like a creative writer -- something that is more and more essential to the development of the translator's craft.

They strengthened my confidence as a creative writer ... professional writers (both authors and translators) are very much aware of the problems posed by grammar and syntax, which sometimes seem to be taken for granted.

At the 2015 BCLT summer school I ran a very successful OuLiPo-inspired workshop based on writing to constraints. Translators were asked to work from a text, which, in effect, fulfilled the role of the source text, and so they never had to face the “blank page”, the fear of the lack of structure. I was able to try and test the kind of exercise most helpful to literary translators and argued at the PETRA-E conference at Budapest the following October, that

the “literary creativity” of translators could indeed be developed through creative writing exercises.²

For a few years now I have coordinated these creative writing workshops at the BCLT summer school and carefully chosen writers with ample experience as creative writing tutors. Meeting with them beforehand and exchanging ideas for workshops has always been fun. The brief has always been clear: the most effective creative writing exercises for translators are those that start off by looking at texts, that allow some space to discuss how these texts tackle a particular aspect and then use them as springboards for the creation of new writing. So one year the translators worked on English folktales and were invited to read a few tales beforehand and encouraged to re-contextualise the folktale by placing its characters and actions into a more contemporary setting. Last year, translators worked with memory and were asked to look at short extracts from novels which engaged with memory in different ways – locating memory in an object, the senses, or a place, as well as creating a juxtaposition and a layering of memories.

What all these exercises do is encourage translators to match that concentrated gaze of the writer on a particular aspect of writing – on character placed in a context that is given by the (source) text, or an object, so as to unlock a memory. If stuck, the translator can always go back to the precursor text – the “source”. After all, isn’t this what all writers do? Writing is learnt by doing, and in order to know how to begin to *do* (*write? make?*), you need to look at the ways in which others have done it before you. The last couple of weeks the BCLT offered workshops on how to write a reader’s report. We discussed the reader’s report as a “literary genre” (following Ester Allen’s illuminating article in *The Guardian*³) and then we looked at examples. These examples were our “precursor” texts. Following this session, students (many of them on the MA in Literary Translation at UEA) were invited to bring their reports to be workshopped at the next session. It’s the same principle: wouldn’t writing workshops also benefit non-literary translators?

While many literary translators do not embrace the profession because they would also like to become writers of “original work” (a novel, poetry, a playscript), they are still drawn to literature because they have been moved by what they have read – and, if they have

² See PETRA-E Framework for the Education and Training of Literary Translators: <https://petra-educationframework.eu/>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/20/fiction>

read it in one language, they feel the urge to see it *written* in another. Kate Briggs refers to translation's basic instruction, its "genre-defining constraint" as "to write the writing again in another language" (p. 308). And no matter how meticulously you follow the steps in your method, your process of translation, each time, this writing will be *different*. What better way of preparing translators for these different writings, than by opening the scope and mastery of their writing abilities?